SECOND PERSON SINGULAR PRONOUNS IN MANDARIN SPOKEN IN TAIWAN

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Abstract

As in many European languages, there are two choices for the second person singular pronoun in Mandarin *Ni* (the plain form, like French *tu*) and *Nin* (the polite form, like French *vous*) This study discusses a change in progress in the usage of these pronouns by native Mandarin speakers in Taiwan in the light of a framework proposed by Brown and Gilman (1960) Brown and Gilman indicated that pronoun usage in many European languages was governed by two semantics—power and solidarity, and that, in the past century, the solidarity semantic had won out over the power semantic However, the results of this study show that in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, at the present stage of this changing process, it is the nonreciprocal power semantic that has gained supremacy The results further reveal that besides power, formality and age -- two factors neglected in Brown and Gilman's model-- also play important roles in guiding the modern usage of these pronouns in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan

Introduction

As in the European languages, there are two choices for the second person singular pronoun in Mandarin *ni* (the plain form, like French *tu*) and *nin* (the polite form, like French *vous*). However, as Chinese societies become more modernized, the traditional rules governing the usage of these pronouns seem to have changed In Mainland China, since the revolution in 1949, *nin* has been replaced almost entirely by *ni* (Fang and Heng, 1983) Following a similar trend, it seems that nowadays Mandarin speakers in Taiwan use *nin* much less often than previously in their everyday face-to-face communication Departing from this observation, this paper discusses a change in progress in the usage of *ni* and *nin* by native Mandarin speakers in Taiwan in the light of the framework proposed by Brown and Gilman (1960)

The data presented in this study are partly based on my own experiences and partly collected from eight native speakers in Ann Arbor as well as some information gathered from a young university professor in Taiwan The informants in Ann Arbor, ages 25 to 32 years, are all students at the University of Michigan

Brown and Gilman's Model

In their classic paper *Pronouns of Power and Solidarity*, Brown and Gilman (1960) proposed that pronoun usage in many European languages was governed by two semantics, which they call power and solidarity The power pronoun semantic, like the power relationship, is nonreciprocal, that is, the superior says T and receives V, whereas the inferior says V and receives T. Between power equals, pronominal address is reciprocal, equals of upper classes exchange the mutual V and equals of the lower classes exchange T.

Since not all differences between people are related to power, a second semantic, i e , the solidarity semantic, came into play in the European norms of address as a means of differentiating address among power equals Solidarity is symmetrical, the corresponding norms of address are thus reciprocal with T becoming more probable as solidarity increases The application of this semantic was later expanded to the power-unequal situations However, these rules of address were found in conflict in two power-unequal situations -- from an inferior to a superior who was solidary, and from a superior to an inferior who is not solidary Based on their data, Brown and Gilman claim that, in the past century, the solidarity semantic has gained supremacy The result is thus a simple one-dimensional system for all the three power relations, with the reciprocal T for solidarity and reciprocal V for the nonsolidarity

Ni versus *Nin*

The traditional rules of *ni* and *nin* in Mandarin (spoken both in Mainland China and in Taiwan) could basically be summed up as follows

Ni

1 To familiar and solidary power equals e g , classmates, friends, fellow workers, and colleagues
2 To lower ranks e g , teacher to student, employer to employee, master to servant, parents to children, and officer to soldier
3 To equals of the family and kin e g , brothers and sisters, husband and wife, and cousins

Nin

1 To higher ranks e g , chairman of the province, officials, judges, rich businessmen, teachers, and professors
2 To celebrities e g , famous scholars or famous writers
3 To previous generation or elderly people e g , grandparents, parents, uncles, and elders in the communities
4 To nonfamiliar power equals or strangers
(Throughout this paper, I will use "superiors" to include higher-ranks, celebrities, previous generation, and elders)

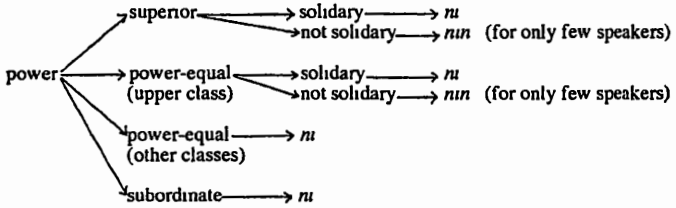
As mentioned previously, in Mainland China, *nin* has been replaced almost entirely by *ni* since the revolution in 1949 (Fang and Heng, 1983) Similarly, it appears that Taiwan is now in a final stage of a process of change

Two of my informants claimed that they used *nin* (mostly in letters to superiors) only when they were in elementary school because of the teacher's instruction, they have never used it again, either in writing or speaking Three informants stated that they used *nin* only in letters to superiors (both familiar and nonfamiliar) One asserted that she used *nin* only in very formal situations or in letters to persons who were both much older and much more powerful, for example, to a famous elderly professor These informants all indicated that in their daily life they rarely heard people use *nin*

Only two informants claimed that they still use both pronouns in speaking and writing However, it seems that these two speakers use *ni* and *nin* under somewhat different guiding principles One indicated that he uses *nin* to superiors, especially nonfamiliar superiors, but that with very intimate superiors such as his parents, he did not use *nin* in speaking (but used it in correspondence) When he first meets a power equal with fine occupation, he sometimes also addresses him as *nin* , but he would not use it with any strangers or subordinates The other

claimed that he still uses *nin* in a somewhat traditional way, only that he does not use *nin* when addressing his parents, grandparents, and relatives of previous generation (This is probably because with these people he speaks Taiwanese instead of Mandarin, in Taiwanese, there is no such distinction) However, both speakers admitted that in their daily life, they seldom hear other people use *nin*

As I stated earlier, Brown and Gilman indicate that when the conflict between power and solidarity arises, it is solidarity that has gained supremacy However, as the above evidence reveals, this seems not to be the case of the Mandarin spoken in Taiwan At the present stage of the changing process, for most speakers, *nin* is not used at all in daily face-to-face communication For few speakers who still employ it in daily conversation, it is addressed only to superiors, but not to nonsolidary inferiors or strangers And only for few upper-class people, it is used to address non-familiar power-equals Given this, it seems that in the modern usage of these pronouns in Taiwan, it is the nonreciprocal power semantic which won out over the reciprocal solidarity semantic We could say that for the few speakers to whom the solidarity semantic still applies in their daily conversation, it is not an independent parameter but a dependent parameter under the power semantic Speakers make the decisions to use *ni* or *nin* mainly under the power semantic, only in conversations to superiors (or to upper-class power-equals) do some speakers make a further decision based on solidarity The decision-making process for speakers who still use *nin* in their daily conversation is shown as follows.



For speakers who use *nin* only in correspondence (actually, according to the interviews with the subjects in this study and my own intuition, this is the majority of the population), most of them use it in letters to both familiar and nonfamiliar superiors Very few of them also use *nin* in letters to nonfamiliar power-equals That is to say, for the majority of Mandarin speakers in Taiwan, the solidarity semantic has completely lost its role in their pronoun usage

Most the informants further indicated that when interacting with younger or similar-age (i e , less than ten years older) superiors, although they would address them by titles, they probably would not address them by *nin* The only situation in which they would probably use *nin* was in letters or when they first meet the superior, and a more critical condition is that this superior be of a much higher rank than they However, even when this latter condition is met, they would still feel very uncomfortable using *nin* Moreover, they would never use *nin* to address similar-age or younger relatives of the previous generation

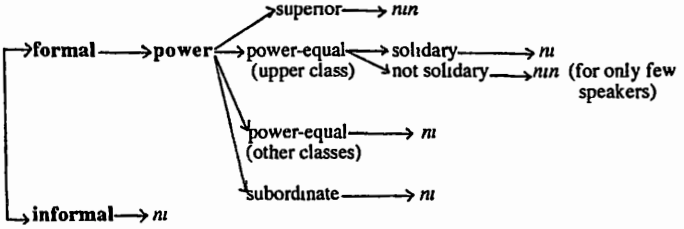
We see that the age factor, which is not seriously considered in Brown and Gilman's model also plays a significant role in a Taiwanese Mandarin speaker's use of the second person singular pronouns Or to put it another way, in defining the term "superior", higher status or previous generation alone is not sufficient, age must also be considered A "superior" might be a person much older, or much older and with higher status, or of a similar age but with much higher status The most difficult situation a speaker may encounter is when the definition of "superior" is not strong enough, that is, where the addressee is of a higher-rank but not old enough. Usually the speaker struggles to some degree in his decision-making process in such a

situation And such a situation is also where the most variations of address form occur (either *nin* or *ni* or various avoiding devices).

Since my husband (31 years old) is an associate professor at a national university in Taiwan (actually, he is the youngest member of the faculty at that university), to check how this age factor influences people's use of the *ni/nin* pronouns, I asked him to take note of how his students, colleagues and people outside the campus address him After several weeks' observation, he reported that none of his colleagues (including the two secretaries in his department -- the female one at the same age as he, the male one is younger) ever addressed him by *nin* in any occasion And among 41 graduate students (ages from 22 to 32 years) in two of his classes, only two students used *nin* to address him All the other students addressed him by the title *laoshi* "teacher" but used the pronoun *ni* Two or three students, although never addressing him by *nin*, "tried very hard" to avoid using either pronoun, they addressed him by the general title *laoshi* "teacher" in almost any occasions calling for an address form So far as people outside the campus, although some of them addressed him by the honorific title for college teachers *jiaoshou* "professor", no one ever used *nin* to address him This evidence confirms the statement in the previous paragraph concerning the influence of age in the usage of *ni* and *nin*

Furthermore, as revealed earlier, for most speakers *nin* occurs mainly in letters which, compared with everyday conversation, is a relatively formal style of discourse Regarding this formality factor, all eight informants agreed that the more formal the situation, the higher the probability for *nin* to occur This statement also confirms my observations from the television newscasts Comparing TV news reporters' interviews of high-ranking government officials in different situations, a usage difference clearly emerges For example, in quick and casual interviews with the Prime Minister, most reporters addressed him by *ni*, while in the Prime Minister's annual press conference, most reporters used *nin* to address him except for those from the media with more radical political opinions

Brown and Gilman's model is thus insufficiently developed in that it does not take into account the influence of formality In modern Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, formality and power are the two major parameters in guiding the usage of *ni* and *nin* A more complete decision-making process for the majority (not all) of the speakers in their overall discourse (i e , in both speaking and writing) is as follows



Conclusion

Since traditional Chinese society was highly stratified and the relations among its members are fixed, the sociocultural norms of politeness were originally established in response to the relationships between speakers without taking into account the formality of the interactions

That is, no matter how the situations changed, an individual would be expected to be consistent in addressing a given interactant This was reflected in the old rules of second person singular pronoun usage shown at the beginning of the previous section Once the speaker uses *nin* to address someone, he was expected to continue using it in both formal and informal situations The two semantics proposed by Brown and Gilman, power and solidarity, can appropriately reflect the traditional usage of *nin* and *ni* in Mandarin

Nevertheless, Brown and Gilman's model may not be adequate for the present usage of these pronouns in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan According to Brown and Gilman, for the European norms of address, solidarity has gained supremacy in the past century. However, in Taiwan, it is, in fact, the power semantic which won out over the solidarity semantic Actually, for the majority of the Mandarin speaking population in Taiwan, the solidarity semantic has lost its role in guiding their pronoun usage This may be due to the fact that Taiwan is still heavily influenced by Confucius who emphasized the order of the society He taught that each individual has a role assigned by the society, and that everyone should behave himself or herself according to the norms designated to his or her role In Taiwan, very often we still hear someone being blamed for being "*mei da mei xiao*" (literally, not big not small), meaning that this person is ill-mannered or rude to his superiors or elders in that he does not behave according to his or her role This also reflects that, although Taiwan is no longer a feudal society in which people's status is decided and fixed at birth, people in Taiwan still emphasize the order of the relationship among the individuals

In addition to the power versus solidarity issue, Brown and Gilman's model is insufficient in analyzing the pronoun usage in present Taiwanese Mandarin in that it does not take into account the factors of age and formality Formality and power are the most important parameters in guiding the modern pronominal usage in Taiwanese Mandarin As revealed previously, *nin* occurs mostly in a more formal style of discourse -- in correspondence And for those individuals still employing it in speech, it only occurs in very formal situations Compared with *ni* , *nin* is a marked address form, we could say that in the changing process, the marked form is neutralized first in the unmarked styles, it then gradually disappears from the marked styles

Furthermore, in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan, higher status alone is not sufficient in calling for *nin* Age may also be a crucial factor Speakers feel uncomfortable using *nin* to a similar-age or younger superior; this is a situation where the power is not strong enough to call for a *nin* without any reluctance Since the rules are somewhat vague in this instance, the speaker undergoes a heavy psychological burden in making his decision As a result, this is the situation in which the most variations of address form could be found in the changing process

Before closing, something regarding the power parameter still needs to be mentioned In the present day people face conflicting phenomena In an open society with an egalitarian ideology, each individual emphasizes his human dignity However, at the same time, differences of power exist in a democratic society as in all others In our everyday face-to-face address we can always avoid the use of any title or name but not easily the use of a pronoun In this sense, a norm for power expression through pronoun usage compels a continuing coding of power relation between speakers, whereas a norm for titles and names permits power to go uncoded in most discourse (Brown and Gilman, 1960 167) By the latter, power keeps being coded but in a way which most maintains the speakers' dignity This might explain the fact that although most Mandarin speakers in Taiwan no longer encode power in speaking by the use of *ni* and *nin*, they continue to do this by titles and names And this phenomenon observed together with the evidence shown in this study predict that, like the current situation in Mainland China, *nin* will completely disappear from everyday conversation in Mandarin spoken in Taiwan in the near future.

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